

Mosquitos control the lowlands of the Shortgrass Country. Big fierce mosquitos that bite through Khaki skirts and drill into horse hide. Mean devils that aim for the veins on your wrist or an open spot on the hairline. The kind of blood suckers that show no respect for age or station. Black scoundrels that spread their stinging and itching misery as if 1977 was not the age of peace and progress.

We vaccinated the saddle horses for sleeping sickness. For ourselves, we rubbed on a repellant that fisherman use. I didn't have any mosquito netting to put on our hats, so I told everyone that had quit smoking that they'd better renew the habit. Even with the fisherman's "tecole," the morning roundups are miserable. some days I dread the yellow swamp fever; on others, I fear that we'll all come down with anemia.

Understand that we are thankful to use the repellant. E.P.A. restrictions favor insects so much that I figure that by next spring fly swatters will have to be padded with goose feathers. I'm even unsure that we aren't violating the law by rubbing mosquito dope on our bodies. As you know, insecticides aren't supposed to be used by an unlicensed applicator. But I guess since people aren't eaten much outside of Africa, the rules on spraying or dusting humans isn't as strict as it is on beef cattle.

The boys working on the water gaps have been burning drift wood to ward off the mosquitos. The smoke was keeping the mosquitos off and choking the men. When they'd run up on the banks for air, the mosquitos would move in for a revenge attack. I had to stop them from burning as it was too dangerous to take a chance of being overrun right after a coughing fit.

Mosquitos have been bad elsewhere. Over on the east side of the Shortgrass Country, an old boy told us at the coffee house that they were seeking shelter in a downtown cafe. He said it had been 40 years since the place had been degreased. According to him, the grease and soot on the screen doors was turning back mosquitos that'd penetrate a bullet proof vest.

I knew in the spring we were in for a plague. The first hatching had fully developed beaks coming from the shell. The males never did go into velvet; the females were laying eggs the first week of their life.

It was that kind of spring in other ways. Needles on the spear grass matured twice as fast as last year. On the country that caught the big hail storm, the needles and spears shattered hail stones in every direction. Bark was knocked from the mesquite trees by the spear grass deflecting the ice, yet I didn't see one patch of needles that was hurt by the storm.

High south winds have kept the miserable beasts from driving us from the pastures. Once the summer calm hits, there's going to be a blood-letting that'll make the vampire bat's reputation sound like a pin prick in the bandaid section of Johnson & Johnson. The question then is not going to be whether to go to the pasture. It's going to be whether to risk your life or make a frantic dash to a blood bank for an emergency withdrawal.

Some benefit has come from the mosquito epidemic. Two of my sons laid out at a dance last night. Though they didn't find any sheep this morning, at least the mosquitos swarming away from the perfume and shaving lotion smell kept them awake enough to keep them from falling off their horses.

Every day we leave the house wearing jackets with our faces coated in repellant. Old ponies do a lot of fretting and the men perform a lot of hand swinging exercises. Don't worry, however. Summer in the Shortgrass Country will be dry enough to drive off the mosquitos. What to hope for is that the dryness doesn't get the people and the livestock.